

# Nothing like ADAMIE

At 94, Dame Elisabeth Murdoch is the modest matriarch of one of the world's most powerful families. Strong and compassionate, spirited and independent, she talks candidly to **DAVID LESER** about her son, controversial media mogul, Rupert, her grandchildren and her own remarkable life.

**D**ame Elisabeth Murdoch dislikes the term matriarch. She says the word "belongs to the past" and is suggestive of a sense of self-importance she doesn't feel. At 94, she is incapable of seeing herself as a venerable old woman; in fact she "feels sorry for those poor old things, the ones in their 80s", who get about in wheelchairs and walking frames.

Nor does she see herself as the dominant female figure in a family or tribal line. "I sometimes have to pinch myself and remind myself that perhaps I am at the head of a large family," she says. "I don't operate assuming that I am the matriarch or that I can influence."

Perhaps not. Dame Elisabeth has always been an exponent of the gentle art of modesty, a quality for which she has won universal admiration. Name a recital hall after her, a university building, an art college building, an art gallery courtyard, a sculpture foundation, a cultural leadership award, a research institute, a star (in the constellation of Taurus!), even a rose, and you will get the same response. *Am I worthy of it? Why me? Couldn't they have thought of someone else?*

Consider her for governor-general, which they did in the mid-'70s, and she still – to this day – pours scorn on the idea. "I must say I thought it was ridiculous," she says now. "It rather undermined my respect and opinion of those who were in power at the time." Name her as Australia's most generous woman, philanthropist of the year – which they did in April *again* – and she will offer the same bashful smile and flurry of self-effacing words. *Am I worthy of it? Couldn't they have thought of someone else ... etc, etc?*

Well, yes, they could have, except that there isn't anyone else quite like Dame Elisabeth Murdoch in Australia. Not for generosity and not for the exalted position she holds at the crest of an illustrious and powerful family.

Her husband, the late Sir Keith Murdoch, was the famous – and controversial – wartime reporter who chronicled the folly of the Gallipoli campaign and later went on to set up the first national media chain and newsprint industry in this country. Knighted in 1933 for services to journalism, Sir Keith was a confidant to Australian and British prime ministers, an interlocutor to American presidents, a friend to press barons like Lord Northcliffe and singers such as the great Dame Nellie Melba.

His contact book was a who's who of pre-eminent people – the Queen, the Pope, presidents Roosevelt and Truman, General Eisenhower, General MacArthur, Lord Mountbatten, Winston Churchill ...

"He [Keith] was such a humane, caring person," says Dame Elisabeth. "I grew up in my marriage to him. I always remember when we were crossing the Atlantic and Winston Churchill was on board, and I knew he was up half the night. Keith used to meet him in the sauna. I was shocked the way he [Churchill] was drinking and I was saying, 'How could he behave like that?' And Keith said, 'Look dear, I've lived a long time and I've met a lot of very great men, and the greatest of them often have the greatest faults.' And it's true isn't it?"

And from this now legendary union between Keith and Elisabeth has come 61 descendants – four children, 19 grandchildren and 38 great-grandchildren. Her son, Rupert, ►

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MONTY COLES. STYLED BY JANE DETELIGA.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY MONTY COLES. FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF DAME ELISABETH MURDOCH.

now the most powerful media mogul the world has ever seen, is only the most visible of these descendants – the “modern edition” of her beloved husband, Dame Elisabeth says. From one newspaper in Australia at the age of 23 to an empire now spanning six continents, Rupert had, the day before our interview, just spent \$10.2 billion acquiring the largest satellite service in America, DirectTV. He was now on the threshold of achieving his grand vision – the first and only truly global media network in the world, positioning him to be, as one observer put it breathlessly, “the most influential man since Jesus Christ”.

His son, Lachlan, 32 – Dame Elisabeth’s grandson – is today chief operating officer of the \$41 billion News Corporation, the number three man in the company after his father and long-time Murdoch associate Peter Chernin. Brother James, 30, sits atop Star TV, News Corp’s Asian pay television company, with its 30 broadcast services in seven languages and 300 million viewers across 53 countries.

And then there is older sister Elisabeth, formerly head of the pay-TV satellite company, British Sky Broadcasting (BskyB), now dividing her time between running her own media company in London and mothering three of Dame Elisabeth’s great-grandchildren, two of whom happen to be half-Ghanaian.

If half-Ghanaian great-grandchildren are not enough to shake up your Anglo Irish view of the world, then there’s the arrival (two years ago) of Dame Elisabeth’s half-Asian grand-daughter, Grace, courtesy of her then 70-year-old son, Rupert, and his 34-year-old third wife, the Chinese-born Wendi Deng. Plus, there’s another child on the way.

This, of course, is the dominant refrain in an international soap opera and one branch of a complex and enthralling family tree. Some branches have led conspicuously towards wealth and/or fame – the Murdochs, of course, but also daughter Janet Calvert-Jones, chairman of The Herald & Weekly Times, grandson Matt Handbury, head of Murdoch Magazines, and, to a lesser extent, his brother, Paddy, owner of vast property holdings in South Australia and Victoria. Others branches have reached towards more creative but anonymous endeavours – theatre, music, the arts, Aboriginal and children’s health ... The list is endless.

And then there is Dame Elisabeth’s own distinguished lineage to consider, one which merged with the great Murdoch clan the day she became Keith’s bride.

Her maternal great-great-grandfather was court chamberlain to King George III and ambassador to Versailles; her great-grandfather was aide-de-camp to Sir George Arthur, Lt Governor of Hobart; her uncle was commissioned to lead the camel



**Opposite: Dame Elisabeth Murdoch, 94, relaxing by the fire at Cruden Farm. Above: In 1928, on her marriage to Keith Murdoch, seen right with their son Rupert, in 1936.**



charge against the Turks in Gaza during World War I; and, of course, her father, Rupert Greene, lovable rogue and gambler that he was, a woolbroker who started every Melbourne Cup race from 1914-1944.

So given all this and more, why wouldn’t one seek out the thoughts of such an extraordinary woman, nay *matriarch*, especially if one thought that after 94 years of close observation of the human condition, she might even decide to speak her mind!

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It has often been said that Cruden Farm, 50km south of Melbourne on the Mornington Peninsula, is the seat of the Murdoch family’s history. Named after a seaside parish near Aberdeen in Scotland, Cruden Farm is the cottage that the 42-year-old Sir Keith gave to his 19-year-old bride for their wedding in 1928, and the renovated two-storey Southern-style mansion in which he died peacefully 24 years later. It is the place where their children, Helen, Rupert, Anne and Janet, spent their most treasured childhood years, and the Arcadia to which they and their progeny still return.

Once a working farm with stone stables and a dairy, it is now, thanks to Dame Elisabeth’s own hands, one of the most prestigious gardens in the country. People who have visited the farm – and they number in their thousands – speak of the sentry watch of lemon-scented ghost gums that line the path to the house, the magnificent elms and oak trees that enfold the front porch, the lake with its weeping willows and ducklings, and the sprawling

garden with its profusion of exotics and natives in all their multitude of blooms.

And they speak of its owner, the diminutive grande dame with the CBE next to her name, as if she were the archetypal Australian mother herself – full of both boundless energy and inexhaustible compassion; a woman who’ll refuse to spend money heating her own home, but will donate millions of dollars to an endless array of charities and causes.

And here she is, standing at the doorway, her face a road map of smile lines, welcoming me inside as the rain tumbles and the fire crackles from the little drawing room off the hallway.

Our conversation begins on a rather spiritual note when I ask her about the most valuable things she has learnt in life. “One’s chief obligation,” she replies immediately, “is to think about other people and how one can help them.”

To this end, Dame Elisabeth served on the board of the Royal Children’s Hospital, Melbourne (for 33 years), during which time she was also the driving force behind the establishment of the Murdoch Institute of Research, specialising in child health and research into genetically inherited diseases.

She has supported hospice services for the dying, support care for homelessness, deafness, drug addiction, computer training centres for women. She was the first woman appointed trustee of the National Gallery of Victoria. She has given decades of support to the Victorian Tapestry Workshop, the McClelland Art Gallery, the Victoria State Opera, piano awards, chamber music ... ▶



From left: Elisabeth with Keith Murdoch outside their home near Melbourne, in the '40s; with Helen, seven, baby Anne, and Rupert, five, in the '30s; with Prime Minister Ben Chifley and a teenage Rupert, in the '40s.



Left: By now a media mogul, Rupert Murdoch with his second wife, Anna, daughter Elisabeth and younger son, James. Above: Relaxing in the beautiful garden at Cruden Farm, after her 90th birthday lunch with son Rupert and eldest grandson, Lachlan.

"My life has been greatly enriched by what I have been fortunate enough to be able to do in the way of helping other organisations and people. I honestly feel that it has been my great good fortune to help rather than theirs to be helped."

Dame Elisabeth adjusts the cushion behind her. It is embroidered with the following words: *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.*

"I think it's a very good philosophy," she declares. "People sometimes say to me, 'Don't you worry about Rupert? He's working so terribly hard and flying here and there.' I say, 'Look, it wouldn't help Rupert one bit for me to worry and if he dies

after him and he's happy, and Anna's married a most delightful man [William Mann]. I keep in touch with her. She's still my daughter-in-law."

From New York, Anna Murdoch Mann is full of warm praise for her former mother-in-law. "We have really kept a very loving relationship," she says. "We never discuss Rupert and his new life because it wouldn't be right to do that. But I do feel we can talk to each other.

"She is a remarkable woman ... an extraordinary person. Her upbringing could have made her extremely narrow, whereas she has actually widened. She has become much more open to different ideas. The children always felt they could speak to Granny more than they could to me when

Elisabeth grew up in Toorak during a time when the salubrious Melbourne suburb still rattled to the sound of cable trams and horse-drawn carriages. There was no television, radio, refrigeration, taxis or telephones ... nor was there any certainty that her errant father would return home from his frequent excursions to the Melbourne or Bohemian clubs.

In John Monks' official biography – *Elisabeth Murdoch: Two Lives* – Dame Elisabeth recounts one of the more searing episodes of her childhood: "I remember Dad, when he was raging, saying 'I'm going to cut your mother up and put her in a little black box in the garden under the gardenia.'" He would never have done it, but the threat hung balefully in the air. As Monks recounts: "Elisabeth can still remember the tension as she lay in her bed sobbing while [her sister] Sylvia sat up reading a book and enjoying tea and Thin Captain biscuits.

"Sylvia would say: 'Stop snivelling you miserable little brute, stop snivelling and feeling sorry for yourself.' And I'd feel so ashamed because I was feeling so dreadfully anxious about Dad not coming back."

But Dad did come back – eventually – and, despite the emotional pain he inflicted, he was the one most responsible for reinforcing Elisabeth's natural zest for life. As a child, Elisabeth was an acrobat. She could do double somersaults in the air, walk on her hands, dive from great heights, dance ... Who knows, she might have joined the circus had she not met the dashing figure of Keith Murdoch, at that time probably Melbourne's most eligible bachelor.

Murdoch had seen a photo of Elisabeth in a copy of *Table Talk* magazine and asked a friend to arrange a meeting. Although Elisabeth was barely out of school, it wasn't

## "Look, it wouldn't help Rupert one bit for me to worry and if he dies tomorrow he would be doing something he loves."

tomorrow he would be doing something he loves.' " And yet it becomes clear during the course of our nearly five hours together that there are things Dame Elisabeth *does* worry about, despite her best efforts at achieving a serenity of acceptance. One of them seems to be the breakdown of Rupert and Anna's 31-year marriage. It upsets her still, five years later.

"Rupert, of course, had a wonderful marriage with Anna. That was a beautiful period and it was ... there you see ... he fell by his own determination not to slow down. And she [Anna] just couldn't take it any longer. We [Rupert and I] talked about it a lot. However, in the end ...

"But never mind, she [Wendi] is looking

they were in their late teens because she kept a curious mind. And combined with her incredible physical energy ... they are incredible gifts to have been given by the fairies in her crib."

Elisabeth Greene entered the world on February 8, 1909, the youngest of three daughters born to Rupert Greene and Marie (Bairnie) de Lancy Forth. Rupert Greene, by all accounts, was an intelligent, charming show-off, prone to fits of rage and fun-loving self-indulgence, while Marie Forth was an elegant, dignified and somewhat restrained woman unimpressed by her husband's imperfections. "A Forth never yields," was her family's motto.

long before the two were engaged, and this despite deep reservations from Elisabeth's family. "It was a big, big, *big* thing for my family to accept," she says now. "I think they were sensible. I think they thought if they didn't allow it I would be troublesome."

Would you have married him anyway? "I don't know. I was strong-minded."

Did she think women today should marry at such a young age?

"I don't think you can generalise. I think things have changed a great deal. Women have become far more ambitious about their careers. Whether that's good or not I wouldn't make any judgement on that ... but I am rather old-fashioned, I think. Too many women are ambitious about careers and they very often sacrifice their happiness."

One of those women is perhaps her own grand-daughter, Elisabeth Murdoch, who married Elkin Pianim, the son of a Ghanaian political prisoner in 1993 (the wedding was a five-star event attended by, amongst others, former US President Ronald Reagan). Elisabeth and Elkin had two children together before their relationship ended four years later. She went on to marry and have a child with top

English publicist Matthew Freud, great-grandson of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud.

Although it is no secret that Rupert and Anna were dismayed by their daughter's relationship with Freud, they seem to have accepted it. Matthew was invited to Rupert and Wendi's wedding in June 1999 aboard his 50-metre yacht, *Morning Glory*, and then four months later to Anna's wedding to William Mann.

Dame Elisabeth obviously still has some distance to travel before she comes to terms with the "extraordinary" break-up of her grand-daughter's first marriage. "I'm not so close to Elisabeth," she declares matter-of-factly, and without prompting. "I don't know Elisabeth as well [as James and Lachlan]. I think she's now happy. I actually had a letter from her. She's never thanked me for anything I've ever sent her. Everybody else does, but Elisabeth hasn't.

"The other day she did for the first time. I sent her something for the wedding ... and I was amazed. Somebody in the family said the same thing. They find she is reacting more. She is very ambitious. Very ambitious. She's running her own company now. Apparently she is much happier ... "

If she appears to be uncharacteristically candid, it is perhaps because Dame Elisabeth recognises the inconsistency of a family trying to protect its own privacy while at the same time making hundreds of millions of dollars from often breaching that of others.

She describes her son as a "devoted family man", very caring and exceedingly generous in ways that the public is often unaware of, the antithesis of the "Dirty Digger", "The Beast of Wapping", "The Devil Incarnate", or "Darth Vader".

She is always unhappy when these "inaccurate images" of Rupert get bandied about, but she also acknowledges that he is the chief exponent of a type of invasive journalism which she dislikes.

"I'm sorry about that, but that doesn't in any way change my great affection for him and my support for him," she says.

Did she wish he wasn't a purveyor of this type of journalism? "Well, I think the invasion of people's privacy is the worst thing because from that comes so much more. I think privacy is anybody's right."

Presumably you tell Rupert you don't like it? "No, we don't often get onto that. (Laughing) We've had it all out before."

It is suggested to Dame Elisabeth that one of the major differences between her husband and her son is that her husband might have been less hard-hearted. Often, for example, when he had to dismiss an employee from *The Herald & Weekly Times*, he would take ill for 24 hours.

Dame Elisabeth agrees. "Sometimes his heart would fibulate he was so anxious. [Instead of going to bed] he would play a game of patience and he'd still be playing at 1am or 2am. I knew exactly what was going on. It happened on several occasions. He felt deeply concerned about having to disrupt people's lives. He was always so interested in their families.

"And even Rupert, who you may ▶

think is ruthless, cares also for the families. It worries him but he's got more ... well, I think perhaps maybe where Keith might have not been ruthless Rupert would be."

Keith was a real softie? "He was a real softie." Is Rupert a softie? "No I don't think so, not when it comes to business."

On that score I ask her whether she understands what keeps driving her son to keep pushing, acquiring and conquering: newspapers, books, sporting teams, film studios, TV networks, satellite digital TV ... "People say ambition," she replies, "but it is an ambition to put things together and make them work. Keith was often doing that. It's ambition to succeed in putting these things together."

How should we square then the two images of her son – the loving, kindly family man who feels no shame in telling his children publicly that he loves them; as opposed to the implacable, marauding media tycoon who inspires envy and fear around the world.



Rupert Murdoch with his third wife, Wendi Deng, and their baby, Grace, born in 2001.

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"I don't know," she says, laughing. "I find it hard to analyse ... I really do. I think going back to the privacy [issue]. I think we value our privacy and we expect it to be respected, so we ought to respect other people's privacy. It's a question that comes up often. For instance, I was rather squeamish about accepting your invitation to be included in this [interview]. And I thought, 'Well look, we ask other people to do it, so I must do it.'"

One senses almost a relief in Dame Elisabeth that she feels able to free herself, even momentarily, from these shackles. When I ask her, for example, whether she ever feels constrained by being the mother of Rupert Murdoch, she says, "Yes, I think occasionally I do. I would sometimes like to write to the paper. But I'm very vulnerable because I'm Rupert's mother."

What sort of things would you write about? "Ah well ... I might be wanting to support something or a person which did not agree with Rupert's point of view ... and therefore I'd be very vulnerable."

Dame Elisabeth sleeps rarely more than three hours a night and maintains a tempo that would exhaust a person half her age. Having had a hip replacement a few years ago and a nasty leg injury more recently, it could be argued that she's in need of some assistance.

"Why aren't you walking on a stick?" her surgeon asked her on her last visit. "I'd

trip on a stick, I move too fast," she replied.

In the five hours we spent together, during which time she happily answered questions, posed for photographs, served lunch (at the same table she once hosted Prime Ministers Lyons, Menzies and Fraser), poured wine and then took us on a tour of her house, the only time I saw her even slightly falter was when we were in her bedroom and she pointed to the place where Sir Keith had died.

Do you feel his presence very strongly, I asked her. "Yes I do," she says, grabbing hold of my arm. "Every day of my life."

In most respects this life has been rarefied and privileged beyond most people's dreams. Despite two world wars, a Great Depression and a fire which nearly destroyed the farm in 1944, Dame Elisabeth has enjoyed the comforts of wealth and the company of some of the world's most famous and distinguished people. She has not wanted for much, except, of course, the man who was taken from her half a century ago.

But this is not what draws us to her. Rather it is her strength, both physical and mental, as well as her compassion. She measures her wealth in terms of family and friends. She worries about Australia's treatment of refugees and the state of the modern family. She is concerned about the lack of "loving discipline" in young people's lives – the kind she gave her own children – and the materialistic, technical nature of the world.

When she dies, she says she has no idea what will happen to her 10 per cent stake in Cruden Investments, the family company that controls News Corporation, the biggest media group in the world. "I ought to know," she says, "but I keep forgetting."

"The shareholders would be vitally interested," I begin to say ... "Would they?" she shoots back. "Sorry (laughing), I can't help them."

She also says she cares not one bit for the interactive digital television revolution being spearheaded across the globe by people like, well, her son. "I can't stand it. I think it takes the humanity out of everything."

And, as the rain continues to fall over Cruden Farm, the two of us stand together in her office, with its pile of books and papers spread everywhere, looking at the famous words of *Desiderata* stuck on her wall. I read the words aloud and as I do so, Dame Elisabeth offers a small commentary on each phrase.

Take kindly the counsel of the years, ("that's right, that's very important") gracefully surrendering the things of youth ... ("that's right") Keep peace with your soul ... ("that's very important") Avoid loud and aggressive persons; they are vexations to the spirit... ("It's all lovely, isn't it?") And remember what peace there may be in silence ... be on good terms with all persons ("that's awfully important").

That almost sums you up, I suggest finally. "I hope so," she replies. **W**